

One Good Turn

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One Good Turn

by [Lisbetadair](#)

Summary

Settling into his post, Ghost doesn't want a new sergeant, especially one of the hardy perennial optimist variety, but Price has sent him Soap MacTavish, demolitions expert and human sunbeam and he's going to have to make do. But when the well of Soap's good cheer runs dry, Ghost finds that getting what he wants isn't all it's cracked up to be. On a mission to make things right again, his only weapon a single, stale tortilla, can Ghost make Soap smile again?

Notes

This fic was made as part of a gift exchange on the GhostSoap Discord server, for [SunshineGrimes](#), who wanted something with fluff. I hope the flying tortillas suffice.

Also, thanks to Scooty, from the Writers Anonymous Discord Server who was kind enough to read through an early draft and give me direction.

Ghost disliked MacTavish immediately.

When Shepherd announced over the radio that he and the sergeant would be leading on their first big job as a task force, he'd thought he meant Price's sour-faced protege: Garrick. He'd expressed his surprise: he hadn't thought Price would let his precious, golden boy leave his side, but at least Gaz knew his business. He hadn't expected that his enquiry would, seconds later, be followed by the appearance of John 'Soap' MacTavish, sauntering out of the darkness with a cheerful smile, into the seedy glare of Ghost's headlamp like a delighted urban fox appearing at the site of a freshly dropped kebab.

He found Price's email about him later, tacked on to some tedious chained replies full of the sort of managerial nonsense that Ghost tried to avoid having to deal with. He'd skimmed the memo about equipment procurement regulations because he'd rather have unwoven the plaited paracord around his wrist and garotted himself rather than read it, and so he'd not see the postscript : *new sergeant will be with you next week.*

Even someone as low down in the regiment's command hierarchy, so far out on the edge of the org chart, hidden beneath the label that advised 'here be monsters' as Ghost was, had heard of MacTavish: the black sheep of his long-serving military family, steeped as they were in army history, with officers serving since the Battle of Waterloo. He'd failed his exams so badly that he couldn't scrape through the entry requirements into Sandhurst. To their horror he'd taken it upon himself to enlist in the ranks and work his way up from there. Rumour said that with time and experience he'd apparently grown into a capable and experienced sergeant; although Ghost reserved judgement until he saw it with his own eyes.

He also knew the story: when MacTavish had heard himself referred to as 'Soap', some quick-thinking liar said that he'd been given the moniker due to his exceptional abilities in their close quarter battle simulator. They'd said he cleaned his way through the killing house like human soap. He *was* good in the simulator, and it seemed kinder to let him believe this. No one had the fortitude to tell him the truth: with his family's military connections, anyone who caused harm to come to him through their own incompetence would pay for it dearly. Some wit had likened this to the old adage about soap in prison: if you dropped him, you were fucked. The name and the warning had stuck.

Now, Price had made him Ghost's problem.

Let's get ourselves a win, yeah Lt? MacTavish had said, as if they were suiting up for a cheerful game of five-a-side rather than drop into the ruins of war-torn Al Mazrah whilst the fanatical Quds Force tried to tear them limb from limb.

Ghost had stared at him in disbelief as MacTavish balled his right hand into a fist and pressed it into Ghost's upper arm, as if he expected him to wobble back and forth like a round-bottomed doll. *Save you a seat, sir!* he said, and then turned away.

Ghost, dragged from the warmth of his bed less than forty-eight hours before and shoved into the VC suite with a coffee so strong that if he finished it quick enough, it would rattle him in to wakefulness and give him the ability to see God, and who reckoned he'd slept for maybe six hours in the last two days, was not impressed. As he pushed through on adrenaline and caffeine pills he didn't need some unfamiliar second-in-command thrust upon him, especially one as nauseatingly chirpy as Soap MacTavish.

"Fucking hell." he muttered, and meant it.

In the days that followed, he began to suspect that there was something *wrong* with Soap, because *no one* should be that cheerful all the time. No matter how many times Ghost refused his offer of a hitting the mess hall for a game of pool and a quick beer, or snapped at him across the comms, MacTavish was there, just the same, to tell him that half a loaf was better than no bread, or what was for him would not go by him.

Ghost theorised that Soap had some congenital abnormality, apparently born without the rational part of his brain that would have allowed him to see the truly rotten nature of the world, as Ghost did. Without it, he drifted through army life with terminally relentless, cheerful optimism, undeterred by mission failures, near-fatal unscheduled equipment disassemblies, break-ups, breakdowns or dealing with the sort of stupid bureaucracy that only the military could have. It was *unnatural* .

His happy-go-lucky personality should have grated on Ghost with all the comfort of sandpaper, but then Soap would smile, and when he smiled his face lit up, like a fruit machine announcing a jackpot payout. His eyes creased as his cheeks rose, and in the narrow space, they seemed to shine with joy. When the cheerful platitudes that fell from Soap's lips got too much and Ghost drew breath to bark at him that the world was a miserable place full of shit and death, he found

himself caught in the hopeful, innocent light of MacTavish's smile and the words died in his throat.

As they gathered their kit to capture Hassan, Soap sang a cheerful song, something he had been doing on and off and that initially had made Ghost want to duct tape his mouth shut, but as the sound filled the silence between them he had begrudgingly admitted that Soap had the voice for it: a rich, warm baritone that managed to hit each note with the precision of a well-trained sniper. With his hair reduced to a fluffy strip on top of his head, his soft, youthful face and his relentless chirpy trill, Soap MacTavish reminded Ghost of a baby bird, and for all Ghost's capacity for violence defined his working life, mindless harm to small fluffy creatures was a hard line he would not cross.

He watched from the corner of his eye as Soap took a deep breath, and launched into another offering from his apparently bottomless repertoire of folk songs. Ghost had a sudden image of a younger, round-faced and wide-eyed child version of the man, being sung to by some old Scottish biddy wrapped in a heavy tartan shawl. They were those sorts of songs: romantic Jacobite ballads and nonsense Scots nursery rhymes, pieces of a long, oral history passed from one generation to the next on someone's knee.

He realised then why Soap was who he was, understood that as his nascent personality formed, through the long idle years of his childhood, he'd been treated with indulgent kindness, and little else. Kept safe from the cruelty of the world, his heart had filled with love he'd received and in turn that he gave back freely in his cheerful optimism, his proverbs and his song. MacTavish was an ever fruitful tree that blossomed with kindness, a bountiful harvest that Ghost was allowing to waste and wither on the branch.

In shame, Ghost decided that when the job was done, he would finally take him up on the offer of a quiet beer in the briefing room, perhaps even pass the evening with him. Then he remembered Laswell's orders, and it ate his heart.

They weren't, as Soap, Alejandro and Rudy thought, going out to capture Hassan for extraction to some CIA blacksite, or to bury him in the desert sands. If he wet himself under interrogation and gave it all up, Laswell's job would be less difficult, and Ghost's day a little less fun but he doubted life would be that easy. They would field interrogate Hassan, and as they roughed him up, Ghost would punch him hard in some fleshy part of his body, the pain of the blow covering for the stab of the stubby needle he would have concealed in

his palm, allowing its payload to deploy undetected. After that a tiny tracker that would ping with joy each time Hassan came within range of a mobile phone or radio mast, and as long as it went unnoticed, provided them with near real-time data on his movements worldwide. The bugs they would slip into the seams of his clothes did the same job, but they were distractions, meant to be found. If Hassan had any sense, he would strip himself naked the first moment he could, and burn the lot.

Ghost understood Laswell's orders. He knew that Soap and Graves' indignant rage had to be real to make it work. Laswell was good. She trusted no one, not even Shepherd. No one but Ghost knew of her plans within plans, the wide, all encompassing grasp of her net. By capturing and releasing Hassan, watching his movements, tracking his contacts, they could backtrack his whole network, right up to the rogue CIA faction that had donated the missiles to his cause.

Plans within plans, Ghost thought, as he kicked Hassan out of the jeep and heard the satisfying thump of his body hitting the dusty roadside. He'd formulated lots of plans for the day and they had all gone to shit. Alejandro's intel had been way off the mark and they'd found themselves at war with the cartel and the Mexican army at the same time being bombed and shot at from all sides in their desperate bid to escape. It had not put Ghost in a good mood, and even making Hassan bleed had not made up for it one bit.

They were ten miles outside Las Alamas now, the lights of the city just visible on the horizon. Shepherd had said to let him go, but he hadn't been more specific, and Ghost wasn't in the mood to be helpful. Hassan had been caught with a knife in his pocket, and Ghost had left it there, along with the cable ties that bound his wrists and the hood over his head. He shut the door and Rudy drove on.

As they drove, Ghost waited for MacTavish to say something, to break into one of his cheerful songs to lighten the mood, but he just sat slumped in the seat, his head lolling against the window, watching the darkness outside.

After fifteen minutes, without a joke, or an optimistic proverb, Ghost asked "Ain't you got any words of wisdom?"

Soap shifted slightly, turning his head just enough to look at him. They were driving along the highway now, the dirty light washing over them like waves.

Soap stared at him for a long time.

“No.” he said, his voice small, flat and sad in a way that it hadn’t been before. He turned away.

Soap didn’t say anything else for the rest of the journey, just rested his head on the window and stared out into the night. Ghost watched the alternating light and dark play across him, slumped and defeated against the door, staring out into the night with dull, lifeless eyes.

Ghost had thought, when MacTavish finally wised up and saw the nature of the world, when he abandoned his pathological optimism, that he’d be pleased, but instead of the schadenfreude that he usually derived so much glee from, he felt a strange hollow sadness, as if the collapsing of Soap’s buoyant hope had, like a black hole, pulled in his own joy in along with it.

Finally, they pulled up on the apron of the Vaqueros’ base and he watched Soap step from the car, shutting the door without looking back.

Ghost had expected him to say “ *We’ll get him next time, Lt.* ” with the usual goofy grin on his face, but he simply looked from one man to the other and then, with a final glance at Ghost asked “What time do you want to brief tomorrow?”

“Sleep, my friend. Let tomorrow handle itself.” said Alejandro, before Ghost could answer.

Alejandro and Rudy were exceedingly pleased with the whole business, delighted at having been given a rare opportunity to kick shit out of the Las Almas cartel and best of all, been bankrolled by the CIA to do it. That Hassan’s interrogation hadn’t revealed anything of value, and that Laswell had let him go, was not Alejandro’s business. As far as he was concerned, he’d had a fine day and would, Ghost thought, tuck himself into bed toasting the good health of General Shepherd with the most expensive tequila he owned.

But Ghost still had a job to do. “Half-ten” he decided.

Soap looked at him, lifting his downcast eyes only briefly enough to glance at Ghost only for the barest minimum time before he nodded agreement, turned and walked away.

Ghost felt something catch in his chest as he watched Soap depart, slumped and exhausted out of the glare of the headlights. He had a

strange urge to call out, say something as MacTavish would have done, but Ghost's life had not armed him with a supply of optimistic proverbs, and when he opened his mouth to speak, he realised that he could not find the words.

In the little room Alejandro had loaned him, the press of a failure that he didn't understand heavy on his shoulders, Ghost gathered a fresh set of clothes and a clean mask. He stripped his kit off, divesting himself of the weight of his weapons and armour, but felt no lighter when he was done. By all accounts, his mission had also been a roaring success, but the price: the shattering of MacTavish's enthusiasm, the snuffing out of his bright flame did not feel like a burden he could bear.

The gym in the recreational centre had a big, communal shower. In the daytime, it rang to the sound of cheerful chatter, spraying water and song, but drawing close to midnight it was a silent, echoing space. Ghost dropped a length of scavenged wood behind the door to bar it shut and stripped off in solitude. He liked to turn on several of the showers together, and where their sprays converged, lie flat on the cool tiled floor and let the white noise of the falling water envelop him like soothing rain.

Ghost's skill in singing was that of the circus knife thrower: throwing himself at each note and missing every single one. Someone had once joked that he would have more success in his interrogations if he tried to do them melodically, an observation that, after they'd cleaned up all the blood, no one had made again. He tried a few bars of one of MacTavish's little ditties experimentally, but the song came out too high and reedy, the weak sound dying in the air almost as soon as it left his lips. He rose and turned off the water, feeling clean but not absolved.

In the cavernous mess hall, a stale smell hung in the air, the ghost of meals from the day before still haunting the space. The catering corps always left something out for the late-working staff, and under the glow of a single bank of warming lamps, two trays held offerings of rice, tortillas and to Ghost's eyes, some unidentifiable meat and bean stew that had been festering for so long that it had turned the colour and consistency of mud. The rice had crisped over, forming a thick, spikey crust. Someone had recently poked a hole in through and excavated a deep bore into the lower layers to find the last shreds of something edible. A moth that had fluttered too close to the glare of the warmed lamp and burned, struggled pitifully in the stew. Under the cover of his mask, Ghost wrinkled his nose in disgust.

He picked up one of the desiccated tortillas, a solid, unbending disc that when he tapped it on the edge of the metal counter made an alarming clang. In a moment of exhausted whimsy, he flicked his wrist and watched it sail out over the empty room like a frisbee.

It was then, as he squinted out into the darkness that he noticed the figure.

Soap was asleep, slumped over the long table, his face half visible in the gloom, resting on the cushion of his folded arms. Jammed into the crook of his elbow, his cheeks were pushed up and out, plumping his face like a renaissance cherub. Beside him a cardboard box of the muddy stew lay open, half-eaten, and around his head scattered grains of rice formed a wide, arching halo. His fluffy mohawk stuck up in grubby clumps, matted with sweat and dust. He looked like some overwrought toddler that had fallen asleep face down in his food. Ghost had a strange, protective urge to scoop him up and carry him back to his bed.

Ghost knew from experience that when Soap inevitably woke up, either by himself, or when the early morning shift of cooks started rattling their pots and pans, he would be so stiff and sore from sleeping hunched in the cool air of the mess hall like a cooked prawn that he would have to lever himself from the chair like an old man, every knotted muscle screaming, and stagger back to his bed.

He didn't deserve that, thought Ghost.

He unzipped his sweater, and carefully draped it over Soap's shoulders, insulating him against the chill of the air-conditioned room. Soap did not stir at this touch. He carried on making a soft, snoring noise with each breath. Ghost paused, unsure of his next move. He needed to wake him up, but how? He didn't deserve to be shoved into consciousness with a hard poke, or a barked command. Gingerly, he reached out, and with gentle, probing fingers stroked his hand across the springy stubble of Soap's head. The bristle bent and swayed under the weight, each filament of hair pushing back. It was softer than he expected, and it tickled his fingers, a sensation that he strangely enjoyed.

Soap stirred, snuffled and wiggled briefly before settling back to sleep with a sigh.

"Johnny?" whispered Ghost.

He stroked his hand over the scraggly mohawk, sticky and matted. His

fingers caught on a clump and he had to tug them free. Soap scrunched up his face and made a disgruntled noise.

“Johnny. Wake up.”

Soap’s eyes cracked open a fraction and he unfolded like a cat, stretching out his arms with drawn out noise: half squeal, half grunt. He opened his eyes fully and stared at Ghost, vacant and bleary until a cog dropped into place and he snapped upright, eyes wide. He tried to say something, without working out what it should be and what came out was a long, strangled squeak.

“You should go to bed.” said Ghost, cutting him off. “It’s been a long day.”

Soap’s mouth snapped shut, and his face hardened. His brain, unable to make sense of the present, had recalled his pre-occupation before he had collapsed into sleep.

“Aye. And for what?” he snapped.

He got control of himself moments later, and looked away, nervous, clearly regretting the short outburst as Ghost inclined his head, considering the question. He had known this was the crux of the matter, and caught between the bind of Laswell’s confidence and Soap’s fury, Ghost had few places to hide.

He tried to be coy and, short on the accumulated wealth of family proverbs that Soap had, did his best with the long discarded remnants of his bare pass in English Literature.

He sighed. “There are more things in heaven and earth, Johnny.”

In the cavernous space of the mess hall, the words felt flat and wrong. Soap stared at him, and Ghost felt the disappointment in his glare. This was not working.

Off-balance, Ghost cast around for inspiration and spotted a shape in the shadows, the very thing that had led him to set out into the darkened room. Eager to try a distraction he snatched up the stale tortilla from where it had landed on a nearby table and held it aloft between his thumb and forefinger, a gross caricature of a priest consecrating communion bread.

“Look” he said, and with a flick of his wrist, he sent it spinning through the air.

MacTavish watched it sail towards him, still too sleepy and too horrorstuck to react. It hit him square in the chest and landed on the table in front of him with a soft thump. He stared at it, dumbstruck for a few seconds, and then looked up at Ghost, clearly appalled at his commander's antics.

Eventually, after an awkward silence he snorted, shook his head and exclaimed "You're *nuts!*"

"So people keep telling me," said Ghost. He decided to press ahead "Anyway, let's get you to bed."

This time MacTavish did laugh, a short, derisive gunshot of noise "Get me to bed? What? Tuck me in and read me a story?"

Ghost shrugged, refusing to rise to the bait. "If you like."

MacTavish snorted "No thanks! I've got enough nightmares to look forward to after today." He shrugged his shoulders, slid his arms into the sweater and then, as he stretched his arms forward and couldn't reach the end of the cuffs, seemed to notice it properly for the first time. He plucked at it with his still covered fingers, like a curious bird.

"Is... is this *yours* ?"

"It's chilly," said Ghost. He wondered if this had been a step too far, but it was too late to do anything about it now. "You can have a borrow. Fits you perfectly."

Soap laughed, a deranged noise more overwhelmed confusion than genuine humour. A head taller and much broader than MacTavish, the sweatshirt hung off his more compact frame, sagging around his shoulders, too long in the arms unless he rolled up the cuffs. Soap rubbed his eyes, but with his hands still trapped in the too long sleeves he looked like an exhausted child.

"What the fuck is going on?" asked Soap, suddenly serious. "One minute you're going for gold at the world's grumpiest bastard final and now you're chucking fucking flatbreads at me like you're in the bloody circus."

Ghost shrugged and wondered that perhaps he was best just being honest ?. "You seemed upset. Thought I'd try cheering you up."

"I seemed *upset* ? Yeah. I fucking wonder wh-"

“Do you know anything about biology?”

“ *Whit?* ” the word snapped from Soap’s mouth. He seemed to whistle the first syllable, then snap the air back behind his teeth to make a long, high-pitched hiss at the end, like a brush struck across a hi hat. Then he got a hold of himself “Is that your idea of some chat up line? Because that explains-”

Ghost cut him off to continue “People who study animals. Wildlife nerds. They watch them, yeah? Poke through their shit?”

Soap stared at him, as if he’d grown an extra head.

“But when they don’t know where they go, or what they get up to when they’re not being watched. So they track them. They set a trap, tag and release them, right?”

Soap sat back. For a long time he stared at Ghost, the implications of his words working their way through the machinations of his brain. Finally his face changed as all the events of the day slowly rotated into a new position and he understood what they had done.

“Fuck *me* .” said Soap.

Ghost laughed “Is that *your* idea of some chat up line?”

“You *wish*, ” said Soap. He picked up the stale tortilla and flicked it back towards Ghost. With his poor aim and excess of force it went wide. Both men watched it sail past him with amusement and then horror as their brains worked out too late the end of its flight path, its inevitable collision course with the big, fat bottomed bulb off the buffet warmer unstoppable until with a great crack, it hit the hot glass, and the lamp exploded.

Both of them stared, horrorstruck, as the fine spray of shards tinkled onto the metal counter. Soap looked at Ghost. Ghost looked at Soap.

“Run.” said Ghost .

They bolted, both sprinting out of the mess hall and out into the flat apron of base in a mad dash for cover.

“Why the fuck are we running?” asked Soap, as they ducked behind the convenient bulk of an armoured carrier “They’ll probably just think it’s an accident.”

“If they don’t catch us at the scene they’ll think it’s an accident.” said Ghost as he peered round the edge of the vehicle. No one else was on the tarmac. No one seemed to have spotted their mad flight.

“Fuck’s *sake!* ” said Soap, and he laughed, the first genuine laugh Ghost had heard him make since they’d set off that morning. He looked at him, and Soap smiled back, the jackpot smile that lit up his whole face, a touch of warmth on the bitter frost of Ghost heart.

“We did good work today, Johnny” said Ghost.

Soap paused and looked at him, his cheerful expression changing to one of blinking surprise as he noticed Ghost’s balled fist hanging in the air expectantly.

Slowly, suspiciously, he curled his own hand, and reached out. He paused just shy of touching him, hesitating, as if this was a trap waiting to spring. Then, for a brief moment, they were connected, and in the short contact between them, Ghost felt a spark of strange joy.

“You get some rest, Johnny.” he said. Then, on a whim, he reached up and gently punched his arm, “We’ll get ourselves a win.”

And knowing that he was safe behind the mask, his expression unreadable beneath the war-paint, cloth and plastic, his heart filled with a long-forgotten warmth, he smiled to himself as he turned away.

Soap was happy again, and for the first time in a long time, so was he.

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